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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of gender-linked features of writing upon raters' judgments about writing quality. Sixty-four subjects were interviewed: 32 teachers and 32 freshman composition students. Subjects were asked to evaluate two essays, one written by a woman and one by a man. In interviews, the subjects were asked to: (1) offer suggestions for revision; (2) describe strong and weak features of the essay; (3) identify the one most important piece of advice they would offer to the writer; (4) rank the merit of the essay on a scale of one to five, with one being low and five high; (5) guess the gender of the writer, and identifying clues in the text that suggested gender. The writer's gender had no influence on the success rate in guessing gender, and each group's guesses were often wrong by a ratio of two to one. Both textual and nontextual clues to gender were identified. Male writers offered fewer gender clues in their essays, but tended to offer more textual than nontextual clues. Gender did influence how essays were rated. Results suggest that there is a culturally determined way of looking at gender that students and teachers bring to the evaluation process. (Four figures are included; two appendixes containing students' texts are attached.) (SG)

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GENDER AND THE EVALUATION OF WRITING

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What is the relationship between writing instruction and gender? More specifically, is gender a factor in the way teachers evaluate of writing?* Our research generates data suggesting that there is a degree to which gender-linked features of a text affect raters' judgments about the quality of the writing. Our data also uncover the importance of the researcher-interviewer's gender in relation to the kinds of qualitative judgments offered by research subjects. If we adopt the current understanding of gender and define it as a psychological and social construction, then we have found that teacher evaluation can and does interact with gender and so contributes, positively or negatively, in that construction. The present paper is the first, preliminary report of our research into the area. At present the project is still in progress.

In the fall of 1991, we interviewed 64 randomly selected subjects: 32 teachers with varying levels of experience (new teaching assistants and

* This paper does not attempt to summarize previous research dealing with gender and teacher evaluation. Generally, other studies (such as those conducted by Duane Roen, Shirley K. Rose, Donald Rubin, Kathryn Greene and Judith Barnes) either have a small number of subject or take a case-study approach. There is clear need for broadbased, empirical studies such as ours.

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seasoned instructors) and 32 entering college freshman in regular composition (English 101). These groups and subgroups were evenly divided by sex. We asked them to evaluate two essays on a blind reading basis, one written by a woman and one by a man, from an English 101 class, spring semester 1989 (see appendix A for Victoria's text, labeled #18, and appendix B for Kevin's text, labeled #26). The two impromptus were written in class, as twenty-minute responses to the following prompt: "How would you describe your 'search for truth' and the process you use to pursue it?"

We taped half-hour interviews with these 64 subjects, asking them in a conference-like setting to imagine themselves in a teaching or peer editing situation wherein they might offer the student-writer suggestions for revision. We developed an interview protocol that asked our subjects 1) to offer suggestions for revision, 2) to describe strong and weak features of the essay, 3) to identify the one most important piece of advice they would offer the writer, 4) to rank the merit of the essay on a scale of one to five, with one being low and five high, and 5) to guess the gender of the writer, identifying clues in the text that suggested either a male or female. We divided our teachers and students by gender, each of us interviewing an equal number of male and female readers. We also alternated which essay was read first, choosing to identify the gender of the second writer so that our data would reflect evaluation in two different situations: when the gender of the writer is known and when the gender is unknown to the reader.

We are now processing over 588 pages of typed transcriptions, classifying both pedagogical comments and gender clues. Although we have

yet to run tests of statistical inference, the data has already yielded several evident trends that we can describe as follows:

(1) Our readers responded to gender even on a blind reading basis. Figure #l shows that each group's gender guesses or ascriptions (the groups being female and male students, and female and male teachers) were often wrong by a ratio of 2:1. This is not surprising, considering that we selected two essays that we thought would be difficult in terms of gender assignment. What is significant is that only 2 out of 64 readers could not formulate any kind of gender ascription. Indeed, forty out of 64 readers had developed on their own initiative a sense of the writer's gender before they were asked to make any gender identification. Figure #2 compares correct and incorrect ascriptions while linking the gender of the reader to the gender of the writer. The findings show that the gender of the writer had no influence on the success rate of ascription for either female or male readers.

(2) When subjects were asked to locate gender clues, two types surfaced—textual, when the reader identifies specific written expressions as suggestive of gender, and nontextual—when the reader relies on more general gender patterns extending beyond the text (these types of clues were often stereotypical, like "women are better writers," "women are more emotional," "men are more logical and analytic," "men are unwilling to talk about emotion," etc). There were several interesting trends, as Figure #3 illustrates. First, male readers produce significantly fewer gender clues with both essays. Second, male readers offer more textual than non-textual clues. Third, female readers were most willing to offer textual clues when reading the essay written by a female. We also found that

three out of five clues offered by our readers addressed characteristics of men and of masculine writing.

When we marked all the content or language features in the essays that had suggested the writer's gender to our readers, we found that nearly 60% of the texts was used. This result is especially significant, since all but a few of our readers expressed the belief that gender should not play a part in teacher evaluation. What is also significant is that with Victoria's essay, which most of our readers thought was written by a man, there were ample textual clues identified as "feminine." With Kevin's essay, which most of our readers thought was written by a woman, there were ample textual clues identified as "masculine." Often the same content and language features in essay #18 and essay #26 were identified as being masculine clues by some readers and feminine clues by others. In such cases, the selected features were described differently. When feminine gender clues were found (by both male and female readers), Victoria's essay is described in the following way:

> This writer thinks in terms of context. She would defy the law in order to protect people she cares about. She qualifies her attitude about the process she uses to search for truth with the admission that there are drawbacks and that sometimes she makes mistakes. She clearly values moral issues. She is open to emotion and relies on her own instinct. Although she can be hasty at times, she is comfortable in looking inside herself for answers. Her essay is thoughtful, well organized, and contains few grammatical and syntactic flaws. She shows some lapses in the formal style, using slang like "gut instinct" and "load of bull."

When masculine clues were found (by both female and male readers), the same essay is described in other terms:

> This writer is decisive, logical and linear in his thinking. He hates to be proven wrong. He's competitive and is fundamentally self-reliant and independent even though he will weigh evidence from other sources. He is assured except when it comes to emotions. He has a vigorous style that is straightforward and aggressive, as evident by phrases like "gut instinct" and "load of bull."

(3) Even though our readers insisted that evaluation should be gender-neutral, our research indicates that gender did influence how the essays were rated (see Figure #4). Victoria's essay was rated higher by both male and female readers, whether the gender was known or unknown. But in comparing the ratings of each essay when the gender was first known and then unknown, results indicate that 1) female readers gave Victoria's essay a lower score when they knew it was written by a female; 2) female readers gave Kevin's essay a higher score when they knew is was written by a male, 3) male readers gave Victoria's essay a higher score when they knew the gender, and 4) male readers gave Kevin's essay a lower score when they knew the gender.

We are currently analyzing patterns in terms of the gender of the interviewer and in terms of the relation of the gender clues to the kinds of suggestions for revisions offered by our readers. But the results we have just described, however incomplete and tentative, demonstrate that our teachers and students did create a picture of the writer in terms of gender, sometimes incorrectly, often unconsciously, and almost always in contradiction to their implicit denial that readers should attend to such features. This indicates that gender does surface in the text—if readers look

for clues (and they do), they can find them. Further, we have also learned that readers respond differently to student writing, depending on whether they know or even think that the text is written by a male or female. The image of the writer as male or female produces a different sense of overall relative value and evokes a different vocabulary with which the readers describe the essays. This last finding, of course, has major implications for the teaching and assessment of writing.

Our results suggest that there is a culturally determined way of looking at gender that both writing students and composition teachers bring to the evaluation process. Deborah Cameron and Cherie Kramerae might call this behavior "folk linguistics" and Judith Barnes might call it "gender framing." It clearly operates both for our male and female readers as they identified textual and non-textual gender clues. As we continue our study, one of the patterns we will be looking at more closely is the evolution of folk linguistics in terms of the impact of feminist criticism and women's studies. Are such advances in the curriculum of secondary and postsecondary education eliminating an already existing system of assumptions, or simply substituting a new one, with perhaps a new vocabulary and an alternative writing style and genre that are now to be privileged?

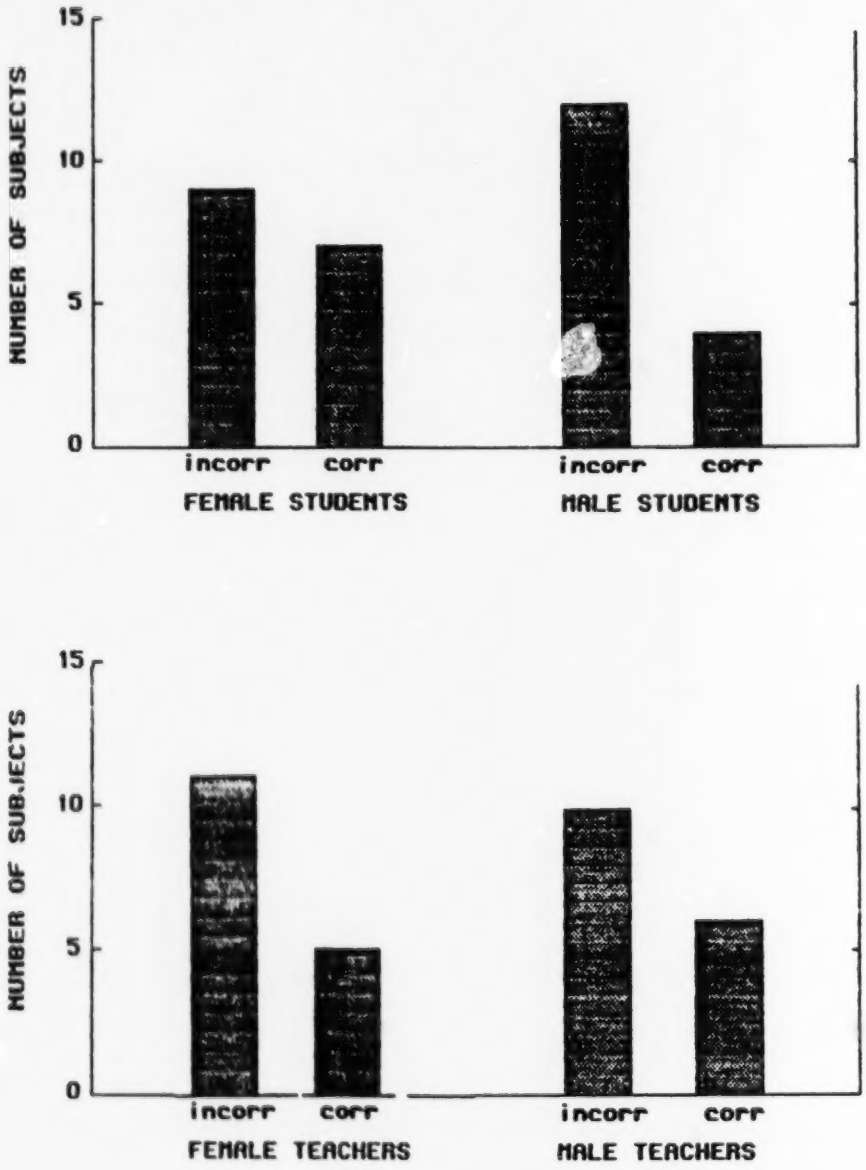
The majority of our readers emphasizes the need for person-centered assessment during writing conferences. In this context, our readers acknowledged that gender may be a factor in student/teacher interaction. They suggested that women students may be more vulnerable or sensitive, while men might be more impatient and just want to know how to "fix" the essay for a higher grade. But readers resisted the idea that gender may be a feature in the text itself or a factor in their evaluation of writing. As we

have said, our initial findings argue that they are self-deceived, at least in part.

By implication, the preliminary stages of our analysis entertains the possibility that a writing teacher cannot be gender-neutral and value-free at the same time. A teacher can be consciously open and sensitive to a student writer and yet force that writer into adopting practices that reflect unexamined assumptions and judgments. In trying to efface gender, we are in fact eliminating the presence of the author in his or her text—perhaps the ultimate and most violent form of exclusion that can occur in a composition classroom. In attempts to be gender neutral, we are de-authoring the student text by degendering the student's voice.

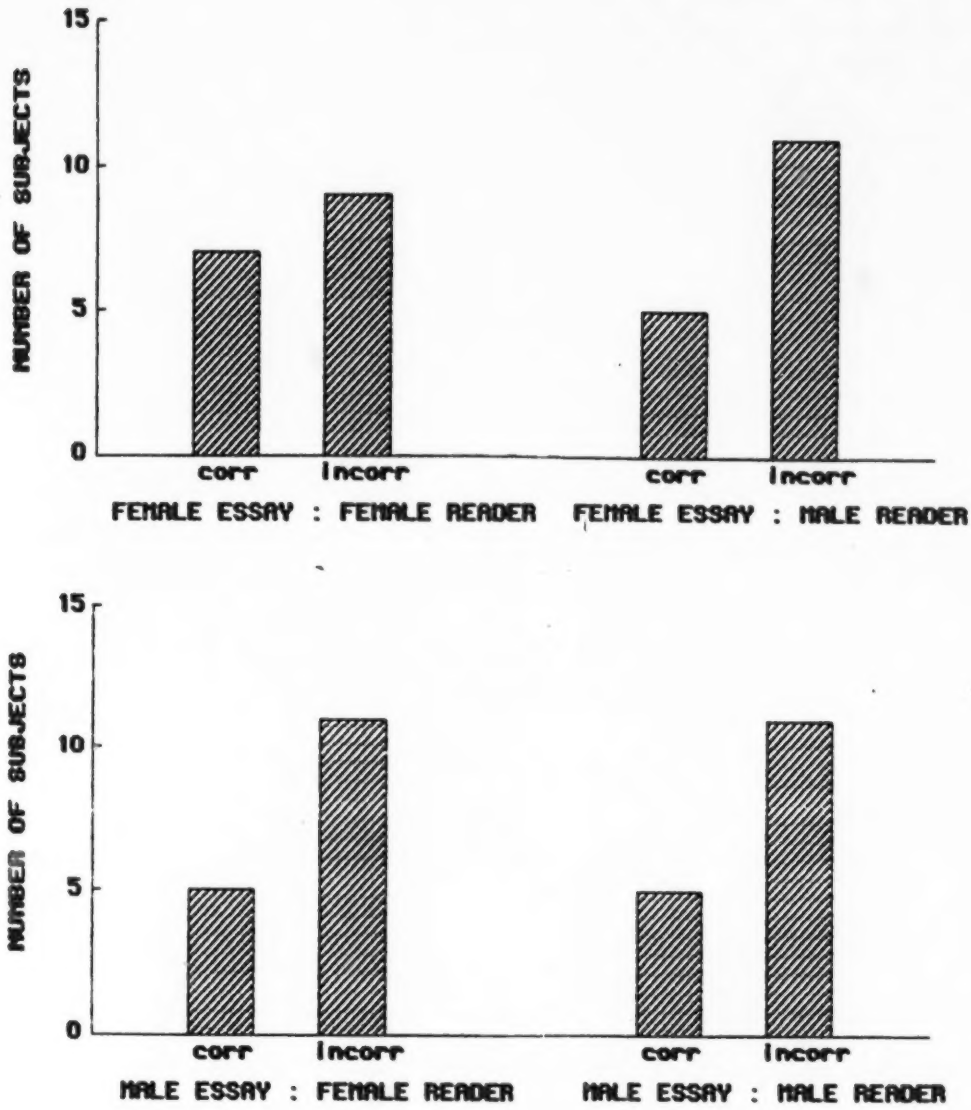
A postscript. At the end of our research, we interviewed Victoria and Kevin, the writers of these two essays. We asked them to reread their responses and then invited their evaluation. Especially Victoria's comments supported our conclusions. Victoria felt that her old essay still reflected her search for truth. When we told her that some readers had trouble identifying her gender, she noted the phrases that to her captured her femininity, phrases like "this process involves a gut instinct" and "it's up to me to figure out if somebody/source is feeding me a load of bull"—those very words that for most of our readers indicated a male writer. These phrases were also often noted as unacceptable for academic discourse; they were too informal and too imprecise. But for Victoria, they mattered. "It's me," she told us. "It says everything I stand for . . . the voice is all me."

FIGURE 1



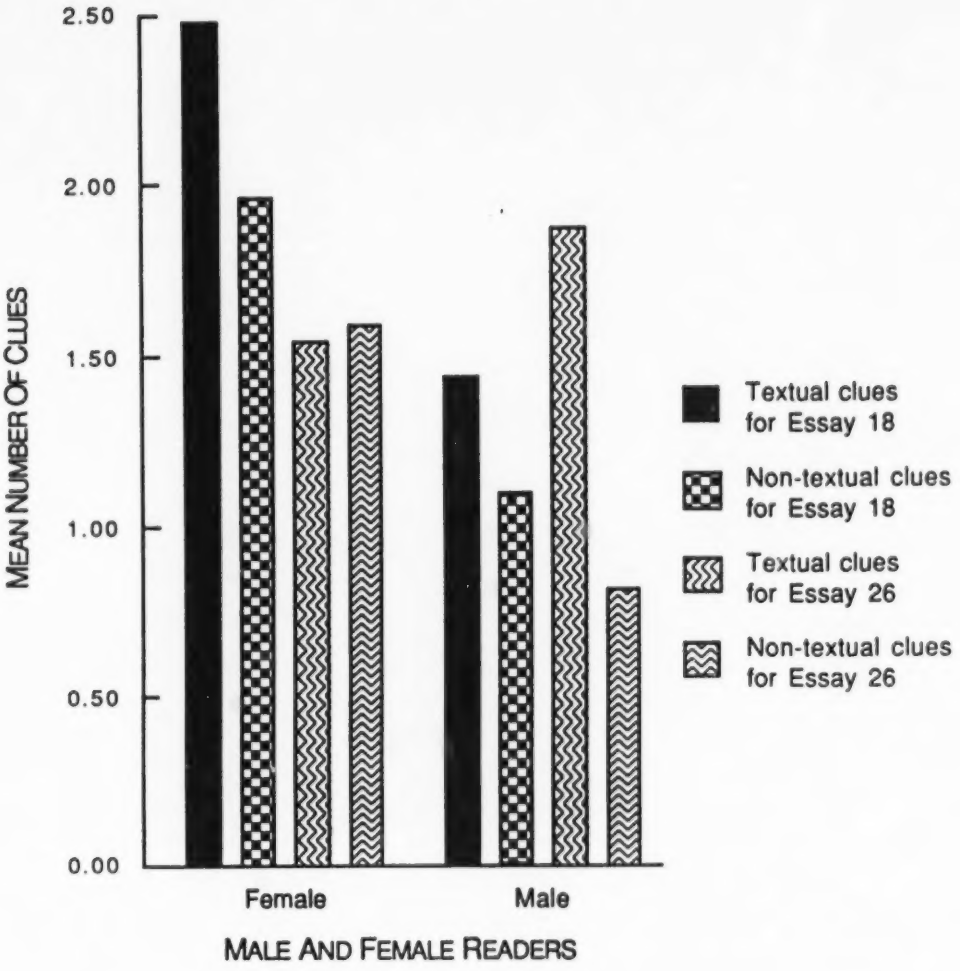
CORRECTNESS OF GENDER ASCRIPTION

FIGURE 2



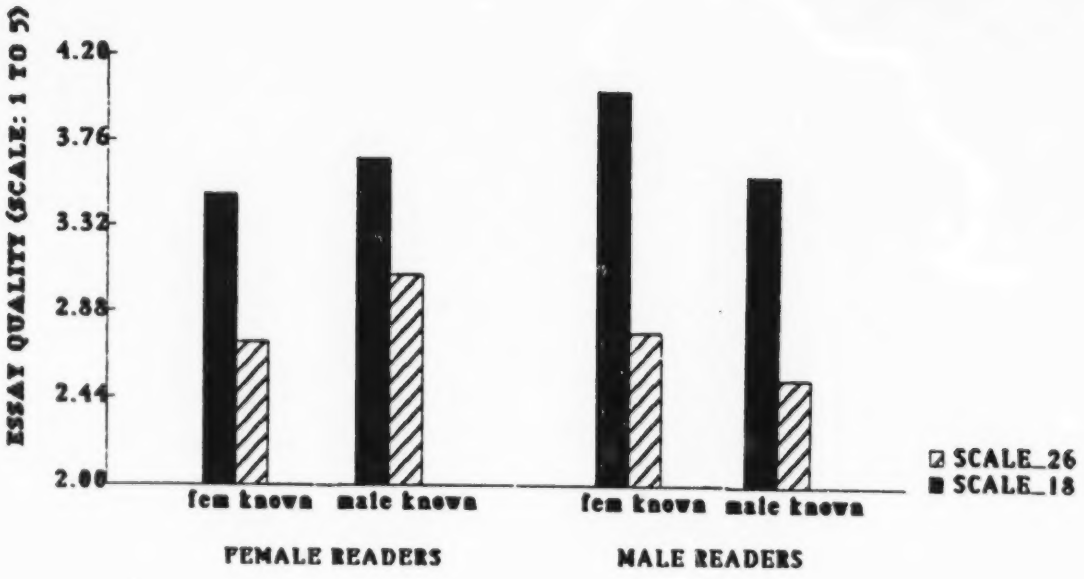
CORRECTNESS OF GENDER ASCRIPTION

FIGURE 3



TEXTUAL AND NON-TEXTUAL GENDER CLUES

FIGURE 4



QUALITY RATINGS WHEN GENDER OF AUTHOR
IS KNOWN AND UNKNOWN

APPENDIX A

[Victoria's text]

18

The process by which I search for "truth" is dependent upon what kind of an answer I am looking for.

For example, if I were looking for the answer to a question of morality, I would look within myself. I believe that only I can know if what I am doing or what I am saying is "good" or "bad". I use myself and my own personal values to determine the difference between right and wrong. I use the beliefs I hold strongly to act as a kind of guide to help me through some more complex moral decisions. For instance, I believe in obeying the law, but I realize that the law is only as perfect as those who made it. Thus, if an occasion arises where someone is in danger or is hurt and helping them would conflict with the law, I would tend to ignore that specific law.

If I were searching for an answer to a question involving knowledge, I would first look to myself and see how much I know about the particular subject or question I am contemplating. I then will take what knowledge I have an compare it to what other people (or other sources) know. This process also involves a gut instinct, for I'm the only one who can decide if a source or a person is giving me a qualified answer. In other words, it's up to me to figure out if somebody/source is feeding me a load of bull. Once I have the chance to gather as much information that I can, I will try to make as accurate answer as possible. It should be noted that on some occasions I choose not to us other people/sources to find the truth. Sometimes I am able to find the answers without the help of anyone else.

In conclusion I would like to say that, while these methods for finding my own kind of truth seem to work fairly well, I realize that there re drawbacks. One involves emotion. Sometimes, in cases where there is a lot of emotion going on, I am apt to make decisions that are too hasty. Another drawback is the amount of time I have to make these decisions. In cases such as these, I just go with what I know definitely and my instinct. Also, like any other person, I don't like to be proven wrong, but I guess it's something I've learned to live with.

[Kevin's text]

26

When Plato describes a person's "search for truth", he was the "allegory of the cave". How would you describe your "search for truth" and the process you use to pursue it?

When I find myself searching for truth I usually try to find it in friends and my family. I also find it through my own self, because I have to take in the information my friends and parents give me and decide what I want to believe is real. So, I basically decide what is real through my own self and my own beliefs, but I get most of the information from other people outside myself.

To find truth is something that comes naturally to me I guess. When I take in information that my friends or my family is telling me I have to take in all the good, truthful information and through out all the bad information. Something that they believe is truthful may not be truthful to me. I am my own person and I like to make my own decisions so when I get the information I take all the variables that go along with it to make sure my decision will be right. There are so many things that could influence my decision, but the biggest thing is whether I trust the source I am getting my information from. That is why when people I do not know try to give me information I really don't pay attention. I mean I pay attention because I am interested, but I am not going to take what they are saying as truthful. Only if I thought that it could be truthful would I then go to a friend or family and ask them to elaborate on the subject that I brought up. So, to me, all truth is something that I have to find myself through others. To know if somebody's information is really true or false is my own decision. I have to think whether I believe the information is real or true. In this part of the decision making, everything comes down on my own decision. This is the hardest part, trying to decide what is true and what is false. I see it as what I believe in and what I want to see is real, is real. Even if everybody else sees the same thing as false and I want to believe it is real, it will be real. This is the one problem with my decision making process on what is real and what isn't real because if it happens that the information that I believe is real is not real, by definition, then I go all through my life believing it is real. This is why I have to take so much caution and time to make the right decision on what is real, who do I get the information from, and making the final decision.

The information that I get from other people than myself is when I get the information to decide what is real and what is the truth. Making the right decision I encounter lots of variables, but I have to make the right choice because it stays with me my whole life. The information comes from the outside by the truth comes from my inside.